



Alone In Green Antonio Henrique Amaral, 1973

¡VIVA EL BLANTON!

“WE HAD THE BONES AND THE COMMUNION WAFERS.” GABRIEL Pérez-Barreiro, curator of Latin American Art at the Blanton Museum on the University of Texas campus, is discussing *Missão/ Missões [How to Build Cathedrals]*, an installation by Cildo Meireles. “We had cared for the painting slabs, the bones, and the structure on which it is hung. We also had to buy the money—\$6,000 in pennies, which is 600 pounds in coins. In every country, you put the lowest denomination coin.” With cattle bones dangling above the giant oasis of pennies, this piece exploring the economics of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jesuit missions is massive—so big it has its own gallery in the Blanton’s new Mari and James A. Michener Gallery Building.

Supervising the reassembly of this complicated piece was only one of Pérez-Barreiro’s preparations for making the collection comfortable in its new home. The Blanton’s collection of Latin American art includes more than 2,000 works by more than 600 artists, including Fernando Botero, Eugenio Dittborn, Armando Morales, Antonio Segui, and Joaquín Torres-García. The Barbara Duncan Collection, consisting of nearly 300 works, comprises the core of these extraordinary holdings. The Blanton’s collection is particularly strong in Mexican graphics of the early twentieth century and post-1970 paintings and drawings from South America. As the curator of Latin American Art, Pérez-Barreiro was the person charged with culling the pieces and planning the galleries.

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Showcasing one of the nation’s strongest collections of Latin American art, UT’s newest museum redefines the museum experience and makes art accessible.

Hitting the Ground Running

When Pérez-Barreiro was hired three years ago, ground had just been broken on the new museum. The curators faced the challenge of figuring out what people would want to see and how they would want to see it—all in a building that existed only on paper and in their imaginations. Foam models and scale drawings were helpful tools in choosing work and planning circulation. “[The installation has] gone through something like 10 major redesigns,” Pérez-Barreiro says. “We had a team of scholars come in and look at it. We traveled all around the country looking at what other museums had done. We really did our homework.”

Rather than display the Latin American and American collections in separate wings, the curators wanted to show them together. “We decided right from the beginning we were going to do a modern and contemporary installation that we would both collaborate on,” Pérez-Barreiro says, “so there would be two voices in one installation.”

By developing the dialogue between these two voices, the curators have created a humanities-based experience versus a traditional museum/art history experience. As visitors move through the galleries, they are immersed in the big ideas of the twentieth century. With works addressing issues ranging from anxiety to optimism, the installation focuses on the social and political factors that have shaped people throughout the Americas.

Completing the Collection

In the past three years, the collection has added almost 200 new works in preparation for the opening. Lately, Pérez-Barreiro has focused on acquiring contemporary pieces. In addition to bringing the collection up to date, he focused on representing all of the important schools and movements in Latin American art. “Our collection kind of stopped at 1980, and I felt really strongly that we needed to bring it up to date. I was very specifically thinking of the new museum and where we had particular weaknesses. Almost everything in the Minimalist Gallery is a new acquisition, and that was done so that we could really have this American and Latin American dialogue.”

In addition to gathering the art from various storage facilities around the state and deciding which pieces would be installed as part of the permanent collection, Pérez-Barreiro also oversaw the publication of all the ancillary materials, including a comprehensive



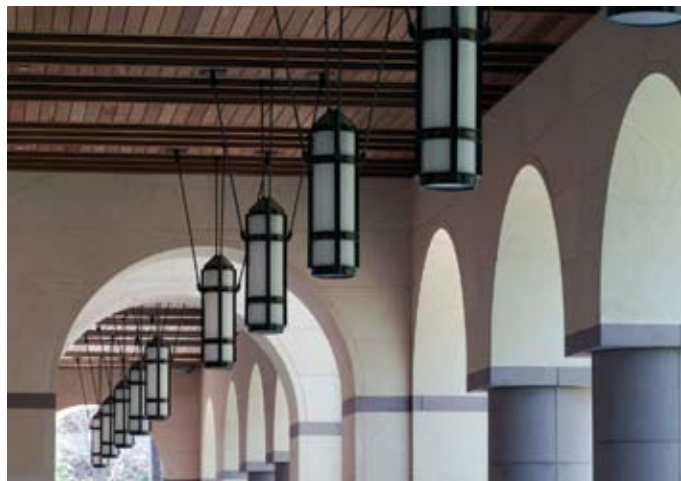
Marina metafísica [Metaphysical Marina] Julio Alpuy, 1962

guide to the Blanton's Latin American collection, as well as the Latin American section of the Blanton catalog. Pérez-Barreiro and his team also were busy writing the labels for the 120 chosen works and developing the museum's Uncommon Commentary audio tour.

An Uncommon Approach to Museums

The Blanton's audio guide is just one of the many ways it sets itself apart from traditional museums. With community voices such as a hairdresser and a landscaper, the audio tour was designed to give local as well as curatorial comment on the work. From the moment they arrive, visitors find thoughtful touches that make the museum as welcoming as possible, including easy parking and a friendly greeting from security guards who wear polo shirts instead of uniforms.

Access to the work is meant to be welcoming as well. Because only a small number of works can be on display at any one time, the museum was designed to allow the remaining pieces of its massive



The Blanton Museum of Art



Vivir: a los saltos [To Live: By Leaps and Bounds] Rómulo Macció, 1964

collections to be easily viewed by the public. The prints and drawings study room holds over 15,000 works on paper. Operating just like a viewing library, visitors can pull out any work that interests them. Paintings not on display in the museum are housed in racks in the museum's storage rooms, and with some notice almost any work can be obtained for viewing in one of the Blanton's specially designed classrooms. "Say you wanted to teach a class on New Figuration, and the works are not on display—we can pull them out," says Pérez-Barreiro. "[The classrooms] have racks on the side, so you can lay out a bunch of work and the students can see the original works."

A Museum for Art and Scholarship

This forethought toward the integration of art and scholarship is one of the most compelling things about the Blanton. It's not just a museum—it's part of a world-class university. The works in its collections are continuously studied and are available to students, teachers, and the general public. In addition, the museum's creative outreach programs bring art and art education to the university, the Austin community, and the world. Being a part of the University of Texas is also helpful as the curators travel the world and make requests for new acquisitions. "When I say UT, it rings bells," Pérez-Barreiro says. "It's definitely important. We're in a position to provide interpretation and scholarship on these pieces. It just gives another dimension to the artwork."

Art and Partnerships

Pérez-Barreiro's office is currently housed in the Fine Arts Building, and it's a comfortable spot. "We collaborate very closely with the art and art history departments," he says. "I'm on dissertation committees. I also run a graduate seminar in conjunction with the Cisneros Foundation in Caracas that's specifically designed to provide a crossover of curatorial and academic."

Pérez-Barreiro's work depends heavily on partnerships—with donors, with other curators, with different departments at the university, and with the Blanton's multitude of visitors. The Blanton's Workspace Series is an excellent example of the partnerships that the museum is building with living artists. The series features site-specific works commissioned from contemporary artists from around the world. Exhibits change every 10 weeks and are accompanied by critical texts and public programs designed to connect the art and artist to the community. For its opening, the Workspace gallery features *The Invisible Jump* by Argentinean Daniel Joglar, who was recently named one of the "50 International Emerging Artists" by *Contemporary* magazine.

When Joglar came to Austin to complete the installation, he was introduced to local artists in the community. "He didn't just come and only meet the curators and the museum," says Pérez-Barreiro. "It's all about this collaborative spirit. Trying to find hundreds of people who can take it farther than we can."

The Blanton

On April 29, 2006, the doors were officially opened to the Blanton Museum of Art on the UT campus. The turnout was impressive—during the 24-hour grand opening weekend, lines stretched around the block at 2 o'clock in the morning. Attendance records show that close to 22,000 visitors came to the museum in that first weekend alone.

With over 17,000 works in its collections, planning the museum's buildings and curating its galleries was a project three years in the making. When its second building is finished in early 2007, the Blanton will be the largest university art museum in the country. Finally, the collections have a permanent home, and based on the initial response, it's certain to have lots of guests. ☀



Diptico (En el desierto) [Diptych (In the Desert)] José A. Toirac, 2000-2001